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ABSTRACT

In order to determine the relevance and provide suggestions for needs assessment in western Kansas, this document examines 81 theses that are relevant to the topic. The implications of the study are as follows: (1) programs within schools and communities in western Kansas are having little effect on important populations; (2) restructuring within communities and schools is needed in order to more fully address the needs of people, particularly children; (3) substantial unhappiness exists within western Kansas, but people are generally adjusting to this situation; and (4) programs initiated to address personal and family well-being are addressing institutional needs instead. Also provided in the document are goals for planned actions intended to foster personal, family, community, and school empowerment in western Kansas. Contains 22 references. (SR)

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Family and Community Vulnerability Determination: Needs Assessment Through Meta-Analysis

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Family and Community Vulnerability Determination: Needs Assessment Through Meta-Analysis

Thomas O. Guss, Ph.D.

Introduction

Dramatic socio-economic and political changes, i.e., technological innovation, corporate realignment and mobility, are providing rural communities with substantial challenges (Herr, 1989; United Way, 1992). Assuming current demographic characteristics of the region continue, there is likely a rather large at-risk population within western Kansas. For example, many young adult males leave the area each year (Brown, 1981; Gould, 1991), while young single parent females (Arnhold et al, 1991) remain in western Kansas communities. Marginal and eroding financial resources (Hogan, 1990), seem to reduce marital quality (Guss, 1988; Voydanoff, 1990) and may degrade the quality of parenting (Burr, 1990).

Community and Development

Also, if the mean age of adults in the area is increasing, the political structure within rural towns (Vidich & Bensman, 1963) is likely to maintain traditional, socio-economic status systems. In contrast, immigration from urban communities, involving parents who value the rural lifestyle (Ploch, 1981), adds an element of political flexibility to community structures. However, unless they develop a majority, their influence is not likely to threaten the existing power structure. These traditional decision-makers support a policy of status quo and conventionality in problem solving, while the "new breed" is more likely attracted to novel solutions to existing problems. It is important for Counselors who engage these conflicting systems to be prepared to address community ambiguity. The professional choice of the Counselor seems to involve over work and vulnerability to "burn out", or acceptance and absorption in the community-based, socio-economic status system. Also, this community conflict over policy may contribute to students receiving inadequate intervention and limited support from schools in rural communities.

These events invite the following proposition to test for relevance, and provide suggestions for further assessment(s) of needs within western Kansas. In this effort, eighty-one theses from 1989-1994 (Fort Hays State University, Counseling Division) were examined for information they contained in support (X) or denial (O) of influence on these phenomena in western Kansas:

1) Socio-economic status, as measured by income, education level or occupation status will be more influential to development than maturation.

Community Development and Families

Socioeconomic transition is frequently accompanied by under/unemployment in many rural communities. These conditions influence families internally (Voydanoff, 1990; Rosenblatt & Anderson, 1981), often through financial hardship (Guss, 1988). Within this external stressor, lies a tenacious circumstance for rural families, termed familism (Heller, Quesadu, Harvey & Warner, 1981). While many partners are satisfied with their level of marital quality and interactions (Schumm & Bollman, 1981), familism (distance, closeness and reliance on kin group members) may hinder identity development, reportings of acting out, and access to community resources for selected families. Therefore, to the degree family enmeshment is an issue, personal development of children and youth is likely to be discounted, and family stability elevated in family decision making and parenting (Burr, 1990). These circumstances elicit the proposition that:

2) The influence of family structure (perception) will be a stronger influence on development than maturation.

Program Support and Development

Also, socioeconomic change and hardship seem to percolate in rural communities to produce a variety of social problems with implications for personal well-being and community stability. Intervention programs may exist but seem to lack resources (Coward, 1981), are limited in policy and approach by culture-bound practices (Jurich, Smith & Polson, 1983), lack multi-dimensionality (Weiss & Halpern, 1990), and are likely to reflect traditional values regarding family and gender (Bescher-Donnelly & Smith, 1981). As such, they may do more harm than good (Gardner, 1990). Therefore, existing program is less likely to be directed at the needs of youth and families, and more likely to reflect institution and community values, beliefs and attitudes (Furrow et al, 1991). For programs to be effective, it is likely desirable to direct activities at actual needs (Bruner, 1990) of children and families (Schumm & Bollman, 1981). Therefore, the following proposition frames variables associated with intervention program effectiveness:

3) The influence of programs does not exert a significant influence on personal development.

4) Perception of well-being is negative or not detected.

Perception and Well-Being

There are indications rural citizens have an elevated valuation of their personal (Coward, 1981) and marital (Schumm & Bollman, 1981) well-being. Also, rural communities are likely to have limited resources compared to urban centers. There are indications a variety of social issues exist within the rural sector leading to several mental health problems (Jurich, 1983).

Therefore, it is a reasonable expectation that adults are likely to be developing negative attitudes, i.e., hopelessness, around concrete improvements in their situation. Perhaps the state motto (Kansas) captures the perspective regarding emotional well-being: "To the stars through adversity". Such an expectation is likely to supersede program attempts to prevent deterioration of well-being and onset of serious mental illness. Personal world-view, then, may hinder professional efforts to support individual development and dampen even informal attempts to enhance well-being. In other words:

5) Personal qualities (i.e., gender, age, ethnicity) will exert a significant negative influence on well-being when the effectiveness of program intervention is reduced.

Therefore, in view of these arguments regarding external systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1975), and the support of the home environment on well-being and development:

6) Community resources to support personal well-being are supported by SES, and personal participation is supported by family structure.

Also, as a result of reviewing this varied research, there is reason to believe some schools and communities are beginning to address the needs of students and families in a systematic way (Holt, 1992; Vidich & Bensman, 1968; Jorganson, 1989). Therefore, there are prospects for change in isolated communities which facilitates the development of programs to address individual and family needs:

7) Program intervention supports individual development regardless of the challenge(s).

Implications:

While the data involved in this assessment are limited, the implications seem fairly clear: Programs within schools and communities, at best, are having little effect on important populations, and may be destructive to the development of children generally. Therefore, it is important to consider restructuring within communities and schools in order to more fully address the needs of people, particularly children. According to this evidence, substantial unhappiness exists within the western Kansas region, and people are learning to live with it. Also, information to indicate organizations (including schools) intended to address personal and family well-being, are addressing institutional needs instead. Therefore, the following action plan "start-up topics" are provided:

Mission: Family Development focuses on personal resiliency and is facilitated by education and support activities within local communities. It includes partnerships between communities and personal commitment within the region. Family development utilizes

collaboration(s) between home, school, and community to guarantee safety. It results in individual opportunity and empowerment. Family development ensures that personal striving is supported, family strengths are honored and enriched, while communities forge a future for western Kansas.

Goals:

1. Establish an entity to serve as a regional structural base for Family Development. It will hear individual concerns for safety and serve as a resource and referral center in providing for this concern.

2. Professional Counselors in schools and human service agencies (individually and collectively) make a commitment to take professional responsibility for at-risk youth and vulnerable families throughout the western Kansas Community.

3. A yearly two-day conference which focuses on a relevant topic to western Kansas and includes representatives from all communities in the region will develop regional and local action planning proposals.

4. Family and human development principles elevate healthy maturation and includes youth, adults, parents and elder folk. The lifespan perspective provides a viable alternative to intervention and services of the medical model.

5. Advocacy for the development of comprehensive and multidimensional programs will be evaluated for effectiveness through a systematic research program within Fort Hays State University.

TABLE 1

Proposition 1: SES to Maturational Needs

	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	TOTAL
X	11	6	12	11	2	42
O	1	2	3	2	0	8

Proposition 2: Family Structure to Maturational Needs

	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	TOTAL
X	7	4	9	6	2	28
O	2	1	3	2	0	8

Proposition 3: Program to Personal Well-Being

	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	TOTAL
X	10	1	2	4	1	18
O	5	4	5	3	2	19

Proposition 4: Negative Well-Being

	1994	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	TOTAL
X	1	9	8	11	13	2	44
0	0	10	2	9	2	0	23

Proposition 5: Individual Qualities to Well-Being

	1994	1993	1992	1991	1990	189	TOTAL
X	1	15	12	17	17	4	68
O	-	7	2	11	7	0	27

Proposition 6: Community Support to Well-Being X Family Support to Participation

	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	TOTAL
X	1	0	0	0	0	1
O	2	1	2	1	1	7

Proposition 7: Challenge and Productivity

	1993	1992	1991	1990	1989	TOTAL
X	3	2	9	5	0	19

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